

DUX. SARFATTI, MUSSOLINI, THE LEADER

by
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PREFACE

TO THE AMERICAN READER.

Recent political events have led some Italian commentators (and not only Italians) to speculate about the danger of a return to methods of governance somewhat similar to the policies of the fascist regime. Personally, I believe there is much exaggeration in this; however, certain stances, initiatives, statements, and the very politics of the current United States presidency recall some characteristic traits of the fascist regime, such as, in particular, the emergence of a centralized style of governance, oriented in a 'sovereignist' sense with a strong assertion of personal interest, intolerance of criticism, etc. These phenomena are not specifically fascist, but they do have something in common with the psychology of that regime. I hope that the American reader, and not only them, can benefit from an analysis of the personality of the Head of Fascism, namely B. Mussolini, as described in a widely circulated book written by M. Sarfatti.

The reflections that accompanied me in reading the text and that I have included in this work can help to better frame the fascist phenomenon in a less simplistic and more historically objective view than the very vague and nebulous idea that too many people have today. Knowing the enemy helps to recognize it, if it exists. I realize that for the American reader (and also the European), it is not easy to fully understand the nature of the fascist regime. It was not well understood even in Italy, partly due to a hypocritical historiographical propaganda that tended to downplay the very serious mistakes committed by those who could and should have stopped the fascists. Unfortunately for anyone who wants to understand something, a lot of time has passed, and then the American mindset (if this concept makes sense) is very different from the Italian one. I am absolutely not able to bridge this gap, but nonetheless, the essence of the regime can be understood even from afar, at least in its most obvious traits.

Turin (Italy), February 2026.

PREMISES

I happened to read (and re-read, in parts) the biography of Mussolini written by Sarfatti in 1926.¹ I would not want the reading of the following to lead to a judgment of a lack of political acumen on the part of the Author. Her enthusiasms, omissions, and her cult of personality do not stem from naivety, although it is undeniable that her fascination with the figure of the Leader inhibits the cold neutrality of fair judgment, particularly in the final chapters; this biography is also a work of propaganda, which nonetheless does not obscure the ability to penetrate both psychologically and politically the subject and the era. Sarfatti understood her era very well and is perfectly aware that among the premises of the regime was the irresponsibility of the so-called liberal ruling class² towards the population and the selfishness of the “new industrial bourgeoisies of the North” and those of the South, made up of lawyers and landlords: “in Rome the two greedinesses settled in mutual compromise, with a system of exploitation, which imposed a double burden on the nation.” But above all, I would not want to give the impression of trying to rewrite history – which objectively is historiography of an antifascist nature, with a strong leftist imprint (let us not forget that during the First Republic there was a strong presence of PCI intellectuals) or liberal, based on a text that essentially does not intentionally describe the dynamics that led to the regime: socio-political dynamics against the backdrop of a very severe economic situation, which have been analyzed and narrated by opponents and therefore seen with a certain bias. Even assuming that there are other shades to reconstruct the picture of events, Sarfatti’s biography does not go in that direction; rather, it provides an integration, a completion of the image of Fascism that has been predominantly disseminated: a reactionary movement defending the employers against socialism and the working classes, ideologically nationalist to suppress social conflict, creator of a state within the state with the explicit support of the Monarchy, the army, the Church, etc., whose power is based on violence, control of all social organizations, and whose consent is actually a forced silent agreement preventing any serious opposition. In short, the totalitarian state born from reaction.

1 Margherita Sarfatti, “DUX”, special edition curated by Euromeeting Italiana / Mediaset Group, 2004, based on the text published by A. Mondadori – Milan, as a supplement to the newspaper ‘Libero’. The first edition is from 1926; I understand there are subsequent editions, also by Mondadori, I do not know if identical to the first, but from reading the text it is clear that this biography was written in the early years of Mussolini’s government.

2 It is a widely held opinion that Fascism was a reaction to the socialist uprisings of the ‘red biennium,’ 1919-1921. This assessment is true, but it is partial. The fear of the ‘red danger’ was decisive for the rise of the regime, but the seeds had been sown much earlier, and I doubt it was a sufficient condition. At the root lies the practice of the liberal governments, namely their defense of the wealthy classes. The opposition came from the left, and it would have remained so if a movement had not arisen - initially ideologically and programmatically confused - of a different nature, which instead absorbed the *petit-bourgeois* demands. These were not of a proletarian nature, nor were the socialist leaders proletarians. The *petit-bourgeois* owns property, which may be very modest, but it is still property, and a rudimentary culture, which is little, but much more than illiteracy; they have something in common with the wealthy, but to a much lesser degree, therefore they are neither friends nor allies of them, quite the contrary. Therefore he is not their friend and ally; on the contrary, he envies them and thinks that their fortune is undeserved or obtained through illicit means (which, incidentally, is far too often true). He aspires to social self-affirmation and can be reformist or revolutionary, but also reactionary if he feels that his rights are being challenged. He is anti-bourgeois - because he envies those who are more affluent, and knows that they have different interests from those of the banks and big industry - but he fears the questioning of property. A period of strikes harms him far more than it harms a large industrialist. It should also be noted that by 1921 the strength of the Socialists was already much weaker than in 1919, and it continued to weaken: at the time of the March on Rome, the Socialists were no longer a threat. Furthermore, the liberal ruling class - later also challenged by the *Popolari* - was not capable of expressing governments of solidity and durability adequate to the seriousness of the moment. The opportunity had come for a sufficiently cohesive movement to seize power. A Leader was needed, and it was Mussolini.

In periods in which – with the help of digital technologies – the number of people seeking alternative information increases, the mass of those willing to swallow any idea not belonging to the mainstream also grows. It is true that this information is not always of high quality and is often rightly suspect, but – while conceding that revisionism is inevitable in all historiography – the 'classic' interpretation of the rise of Fascism as a reaction to the socialist project, supported by the owners and their liberal dependents through the intimidating actions of the 'squads' largely made up of former fighters, who were then rewarded and well-positioned in the regime, if well integrated with a proper analysis of the liberal crisis and the consequences of the birth of the Popular Party as well as the position of the Monarchy, holds up very well; at most, two otherwise trivial observations can be made: 1. Certain events must be understood according to the 'spirit of the time' in which they occurred – and the 'spirit' of the post-World War II era is somewhat distant from certain motivations that were quite present from the last years of the 19th century onwards; 2. Current historiography is somewhat schematic, as it aims to be scientific: it must make use of interpretive frameworks that – like economic theories – can shed light on events, but only up to a certain point. Moreover, the description of a political phenomenon by its opponents is in itself, not to say unreliable, but partial: it tends to overlook what justifies its adversaries. Specifically, the historiography of a liberal and social-communist bent, which was predominant in postwar Italy, had to justify the political failure of Liberals, Christian Democrats, and Socialists, which was the true cause of the success of Fascism, while at the same time promoting confidence in the Italian liberal system based on political parties; from this arose distortions and omissions that long afflicted the prevailing historical judgment on Fascism and its '*Duce*' (Leader). It was preferred to emphasize the violent and overbearing nature of Fascism, forgetting the complicities that led to its rise and supported it even when, perhaps, it could still have been overthrown. Without these complicities, Fascism could never have come to power. Finally, the authentic interpretation of a political phenomenon cannot ignore what was said by its promoters and participants. That the interpretation offered by opponents was and still is the prevailing one is due, though not entirely, to how events unfolded, and it is not proof of its truth, nor of its falsity, but in any case it cannot be complete, even if it may appear – according to the historiographical frameworks adopted – that it is sufficient.

Here, the Sarfatti's biography, precisely because of the admiration that shines through for the *person* of the *Duce* (in the Latin sense of the term³), sheds some light – hardly recognizable today, given the strong difference in mentality compared to her time – on the aspects that cannot be systematized or conceptualized, which nonetheless played a role in the formation of the regime. Perhaps they were not decisive. Perhaps they were a performance, a well-organized spectacle to hide ends and agendas of a completely different kind: pretending to be heroes and saviors of the Fatherland could be useful in certain circumstances – and it was useful for many, in those circumstances. It is the logic of the mercenary: he takes risks, but if things go well, he is well rewarded. And indeed, it went well for him, except for the final outcome. But can we reduce everything to this opportunistic and amoral logic? Are we really sure that everyone is calculating and cunningly theatrical? The idealists, the hard and pure who march confidently towards the finish line at the orders of the leader himself, the naive ones who need to believe in something because they have no other resources have always existed, and it is impossible to know what impact they have had; therefore, all those elements that in any way evoke an ideal must be taken into consideration. This is precisely

3 *Persona* means "mask".

what is missing in current historiography, and this is exactly what emerges in the biography – authorized by Mussolini himself – written by Sarfatti (1926).

APPEARANCE, HISTORICAL FUNCTION, ESSENCE OF MAN AND 'SPIRIT OF THE TIMES'

I consider this literary work very interesting; I will go further: of everything I came across reading or otherwise learning about Mussolini and that complex and strange episode that was Fascism, this testimony is perhaps the most significant - not to say the most authentic or realistic or sincere or profound, etc. - but undoubtedly, from my point of view, indispensable if one wants to understand the figure and essence of the man Mussolini and his creation - the Fascism. The interest in this biography, in many - too many - parts celebratory and exalted, does not arise so much from the information it provides (which is relevant but can still be found in many other sources), but in the mindset prevalent in a large part of Italian society (and beyond) at the beginning of the 20th century and well represented in this biography: a certain way of portraying people and events by writers, journalists, 'intellectuals' in general, and a way of understanding social relations, politics, and the human being itself not easily describable in conceptual terms, probably incomprehensible and misunderstood in its deep motivations in the current era, but very clear and present in the years around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.

More than a precise idea, it is a sentiment that manifests itself in a sort of dissatisfaction, exaltation of strength and violence, the search for overcoming established forms in different fields (in social and political life as well as in the arts) which, on the socio-political level, appears as an internal conflict within the bourgeois classes⁴ and a reaction against the proclaimed principles of the French Revolution and the movements inspired by it in the 19th century. In short, it is a sum of anti-liberalism, anti-egalitarianism, anti-socialism, anti-Catholicism, anti... joined by revolutionary syndicalists, anarchists, futurists, and various other fanatics in opposition to the existing order; there is a whole humanity that does not quite know what it is⁵, waiting unconsciously for someone to show it the way. From the present perspective, the first twenty years of the 20th century seem like an era of uncontrollable effervescence on the edge of madness, perhaps classifiable as *petit-bourgeois heroism*: a strange mixture of ideas and impulses, which – if we want to be extremely concise – could be interpreted as the introjection, into the petit-bourgeois spirit, of behavioral patterns induced by the assimilation of aristocratic values. A symbol of all this can be found in D'Annunzio's works and activities. Since those values are almost deceased and buried in the present age, the full understanding of such a 'spirit of the age' eludes us; we can grasp its pulse through the testimonies of those who were part of it. It is not clear to me whether this phenomenon of the mass adoption of aristocratic values (only partially successful, but enough) stemmed from a direct assimilation, almost a transfer from the top down that acted as a moral redemption through adherence to a model considered superior to one's own status; in short, a self-elevation through illusion, or whether it was a 'backlash' reaction against the values and status of the upper bourgeoisie. Perhaps one should explore certain mental dynamics of the petty bourgeois; it is an uncertain path, but it is certain that this category—

4 The leaders of the socialist and anarchist parties were not of proletarian origin; in fact, some of the most prominent (Engels, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta) came from the upper classes, but the majority belonged to the middle class, with a family history of social advancement.

5 It seems that Mussolini himself was well aware of this. The regime was a coexistence of contradictions, disguised as compromises. About himself, he would write: 'Since the honorable Mussolini declares not to know exactly what he is, it is very difficult for others to know,' on page 257.

like the cadets in the 19th century - takes on great political significance in the 20th century and is still central today, in the more charitable definition of the middle class (the slightly grown-up petty bourgeoisie).

Someone might notice that in these few lines I have almost unintentionally managed to formulate some statements that are a bit questionable, if not daring. Just citing the terms 'figure' and 'essence' of a politician ('public,' as Mussolini himself defines himself⁶) is an arbitrary choice; it might seem obvious, but the 'figure' I am talking about is precisely what is commonly understood in everyday language, when it is said, for example, that 'so-and-so certainly did not make a good impression'⁷ or, at a higher level, in the phrase 'the figure of that person dominated his era,' and things like that. In fact, I speak of *figure* and not *role* because Sarfatti describes what appeared to her and what she wanted to appear, not the historical-political function that the *Duce* was variously assigned by judges with different cultural backgrounds and political orientations in different times and for different purposes. Moreover, the biography was written (or at least completed) in 1926, and even if she had wanted to, Sarfatti would not have been able to fully define Mussolini's role. This could not be discussed before his end, and the outcome of the judgment is not exactly what the Author believed or promoted. In any case, appearance is anything but a negligible element, and it is not considered in the application of interpretative frameworks, especially if ideological in nature.

THE 'LEADER'⁸

Certainly, the domineering, controlling, and authoritarian Leader emerges forcefully – in fact, he is the mainstay and the most significant element of the entire book – but this role is determined by the figure that the Author observes and conveys to the reader. Without the figure of the Leader and without his visible manifestation in the will and actions of a concrete public personality, it is impossible to fully define Mussolini. It is unnecessary to remind that the *Duce* is not just a leader – this is a role, a political function that succinctly expresses the relationship between the guide and the mass of followers, differentiated according to hierarchy. But there is hierarchy and hierarchy,⁹ operational and functional subordination the former – always present in any form of social organization – explicit reference and moral-ideological glue in the latter case. The *Duce* is not only the leader, he is also the indispensable unifying reference of the nation, due to his concreteness. A Leader is perceived as more 'real' than an abstract ideology – with the exception of a minority that was set aside. The difference is not only in the intensity of the phenomenon: the charismatic figure is not peculiar

6 "I have sometimes reflected on the grotesque and sublime destiny of the public man... The public man is born public... It is a moral characteristic... I am perfectly resigned to my fate as a public man. Sometimes I am even enthusiastic about it... The thought and real realization that I no longer belong to myself, that I am... a necessary element for the life of others, gives me a kind of 'nirvanic' intoxication" [I mean: the annulment of the sense of my personal identity thrills me]; Mussolini, in the preface.

7 In the current context, in Italian 'figura' is commonly synonymous with 'impressione'.

8 '*Duce*' in Italian, '*Dux*' in Latin.

9 Mussolini's interpretation of the function of hierarchy described in the biography does not imply any reference to charisma. Its nature would be efficientist, pragmatic. Mussolini presents himself as the man who 'puts things back in order,' which indeed requires firm leadership. This is absolutely natural, considering the reasons that led him to power. But there is no leader without personality, and government is not a mechanism, even if it needs transmission belts, which precisely are the hierarchy. And 'strong powers' alone are not enough to make a leader, nor is any specific technique. According to Sarfatti's testimony, the *Duce*'s charisma lay in the relationship between his personality and the expectations of that time.

I believe it is impossible to determine to what extent such a relationship can be built through appropriate performance.

to any particular era, but in Fascism and similar movements the Leader is such by a sort of superior right: no longer divine right, but that which derives from being the implementer of some higher Principle. In a way, the crowd replaces the Fatherland with God, turning an aristocratic principle¹⁰ into a mass phenomenon (the fascists are the 'best' as bearers of the supreme ideal, the glory of the Fatherland; in fact, many were former soldiers in a war won. What could be better?). Whatever judgment one may wish to make about Mussolini and his system, one cannot ignore the simple and, in my opinion, indisputable fact that his rise and his regime were based on a figure, in this case a special relationship between the crowd of undistinguished, politically shapeless individuals, incapable of deciding who should govern them, and one person, the Leader himself, destined for this role by his very nature. In Mussolini's case, the definition of his figure anticipates the assumption of a specific role, whether as the director of *Avanti!*¹¹, the Prime Minister, or the head of Fascism.¹²

I will also point out – although it is quite obvious – that the emergence of the Leader as a figure and the establishment of this role at the top of politics reflects a lack of leadership. The rise of the *Duce* was not merely a ploy by the privileged to maintain their economic and social advantage – although this element existed and was decisive – nor was it limited to a takeover by a gang of thugs: in a state that is not, I would not say decent, but at least still functioning, gangs do not even come together;¹³ the ringleaders would eventually be arrested, and if anyone really tried their luck, they would be taken care of without much ceremony. Even admitting that without the active and passive support of the privileged classes the much-praised *Duce* would have met a very bad end, we have to agree that this support does not allow us to dismissively classify the *Duce* as a useful idiot in the hands of this one or that one: because even a blind person would see that the Chief can be troublesome to the privileged, since if he is truly such, he cannot be manipulated at will like the politicians of liberal regimes. Rather, it was he who handled others – rich and not rich – in order to achieve what, just two years before his appointment as head of government, seemed an unattainable dream, a megalomaniacal fantasy. Certainly, if certain people are backed into a corner... better that than anarchy, lack of government, or the sterile clientelistic struggle for a few more seats. Indeed, the great enemy was anarchy in the literal sense of the term, even before the Socialists, etc. The importance of the Socialists was greatly exaggerated both by Fascist propaganda, which justified the regime with the need to save the country from 'subversives,' and by leftist historiography, which saw Fascism only as a reaction against the left-wing forces.

But these reflections would take us too far; in summary: Sarfatti wonderfully describes on a literary level – much, much less on that of political analysis, which, to be honest, she lacks considerably (or rather, it wasn't the most suitable tool for the purposes she had in mind) – with a gaze more admiring and, I would say, hypnotized than clear-headed, a being embodying a very specific figure, that of the decisive and victorious leader, the Man of Destiny, as someone who, unfortunately, happened to be the Pope, roughly said. But which Destiny? We are given a clear answer: the rebirth and

10 This revival in other forms of the aristocratic principle characterizes the political structures formed in the 20th century, and even earlier. During the French Revolution, the 'best' was the ideal citizen, bearer of virtue. In communist regimes, it is the Party member. In the current liberal system, the aristocracy is replaced by meritocracy. Since these systems are not perfectly consolidated, they are not strictly hereditary.

11 Official newspaper of the Italian Socialists.

12 I believe it was a serious mistake on the part of some 20th century historians to consider events almost exclusively from a socio-economic perspective. It is true that political interests and dynamics fall under rational analysis, but the irrational and everything that cannot be described within well-defined frameworks cannot be ignored.

13 In my opinion, the state of decay of the last liberal governments was the determining factor in the rise of Fascism.

reaffirmation of the *True Italy*, the resurrection of the warlike and imperial virtues of the ancient Italics, also known as the Romans. This hypnosis, transmitted to many, far too many deluded people, was the pseudo-religious-psychological foundation of the regime: a system that Sarfatti sees as a rediscovery of the intimate Italic nature, not merely as a projection and extension of the *Duce's* personality; and on this point she would be right, but it is difficult to avoid the impression that without Mussolini's personality, as depicted by the Author, the difficult compromising synthesis carried out by Fascism could not have been achieved and sustained for two decades, ultimately ending not through exhaustion or transformation, but through violent death.

THE MAN AND HIS PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS. BALABANOFF

As for the 'essence': with this term, introduced suddenly without explanation, I mean the synthesis or rather the cooperation between character-temperament and ideology, or rather ethical-cultural formation, from which the worldview emerges in the form of a political stance (Mussolini was a 'public man'). More briefly, and perhaps more accurately, I could define essence negatively as that which is not 'figure'. The man's character, his upbringing, the origins and effects of his stay in Switzerland are well described by the Author, who, moreover, already assisted him in his daily activities well before the break with the Socialist Party (November 1914). Sarfatti as Mussolini's inspirer? She does not claim to be one, and probably her role was that of a faithful companion in struggles, subservient to the powerful will, the activity, and the organizational skills of the future *Duce*. We need to be clear on one point: Mussolini had very remarkable abilities, 'political instinct,' and above all, leadership. Certainly, he did not do everything alone; he owed much to Michele Bianchi, who organized the PNF even before the March on Rome, and to an incapable and befuddled ruling class. Sarfatti exaggerates greatly - especially in the last chapters - in her praise of the work of the Head of Government, and it is clear - in my opinion - that there is an intention not to lose her own position, increasingly threatened by the demands imposed by governing a country on the brink of bankruptcy, given that you certainly cannot expect someone with a literary background to perform a supportive or advisory role in government action - after all, that was not her job.

In the fascist system, Sarfatti was inserted into the propaganda machine, where she managed to elevate the 'thought' of fascism to some degree of ideological dignity; a very arduous task, given that Fascism did not have a true ideology, that is, an organized system consisting of a fully articulated conceptual vision;¹⁴ rather, it fed on ideas and images that referred to irrational, almost mythological foundations, certainly endowed with a certain appeal and charm; in short, the rejection of *Italiotta* ('Little Italy', in a derogatory sense) of bourgeois lifestyle and ideas, of mediocrity, the exaltation of will, strength, and power; a vision hostile to liberalism, to socialism in all its forms, a denial of the triad of the French Revolution except perhaps for *Fraternité*, understood, however, as solidarity among comrades and socially in the form of corporatism. This could give an appearance

14 This aspect - a deficiency on a conceptual and programmatic level - was clearly noted by Mussolini himself. It is interesting to observe how he managed to present this flaw in defining his own identity as a source of strength, almost of superiority. *Fascism could afford to be both monarchist and republican*, to be a guardian of order through illegal means, etc.; all of this hid the true agenda: to sell itself to whoever offered the most. In practice, it was the Monarchy that won the race. Mussolini was never satisfied with the outcome; for him, it had to be an unpleasant compromise. Mussolini's entire political life was a slow but unstoppable slide toward the antithesis of his initial position, masked by the synthesis achieved by Fascism.

of originality and novelty, to the point that one could speak of a revolution: a revolution, yes, but... in the Italian way.

The image that Sarfatti presents of her relationship with Mussolini is that of an enthusiastic and loyal collaborator. We are led to wonder what role female acquaintances played in Mussolini's development. The most prominent personality was undoubtedly Angelica Balabanoff, whose charm over Mussolini – besides her solid political knowledge, perhaps superior to that of the future *Duce* – probably stemmed from her unyielding character, refusal of compromise, and unwavering pursuit of the ultimate goal: the realization of Socialism in its maximalist form. In short, everything contrary to the opportunistic and economic-minded mentality typical of Italy (the *Italietta*, as it were) triumphant under Giolitti, the master and champion of parliamentary maneuvering, the man of *parecchio* ('quite a lot'; Giolitti would have answered in this way to those who had asked him what Italy would have gained if it had not intervened in the war against Austria-Hungary in 1915) and – irony of fate – pioneer of the Fascists who entered Parliament with his active consent;¹⁵ for all this, we can well expect that he exerted a strong emotional and intellectual attraction on the young Mussolini, still deluded by the maximalist ideal, which he abandoned when he realized that in that way he would accomplish very little. Sarfatti offers a description of Balabanoff that is not long, but fairly complete and without acrimony (she could afford it, because if there was rivalry between them, Sarfatti ended up victorious; precisely because the Russian exiles did not accept compromises or reversals, and Balabanoff broke with Mussolini, like all or almost all of the socialist leaders. But it may also be that the adherence to the socialist ideal and perhaps Mussolini's own personality prevented the emergence of a real conflict; in Sarfatti's account, I see no evidence to that effect).

"Small and deformed, she was extremely intelligent, with a strange intelligence that flashed, had gaps, and bursts of brilliance. She embraced Marx and Marxism like a fetishistic religion, swearing by the master in many languages... she spoke correct, fiery, and effective Italian... her shrill and cracked voice... scraped deep into your guts, with the suggestive power of mystics and hysterics." She had an extraordinary ability to communicate her political passion to the onlookers, to the point of involving them emotionally; something similar to D'Annunzio's expressiveness, but more violent, direct, and fanatical, free of rhetorical art, which is more evident in the Poet. "She imposed herself on the young man from Romagna with the imbalances, deficiencies, and excesses of his fanatical temperament itself," Sarfatti continues, "She never found him revolutionary enough..." "You never understand anything", replied the Director of *Avanti!*, who "in the end sent her away." Clash of characters? Or perhaps of personalities? It seems that Sarfatti attributes an even stronger personality to her, and in her biography, Balabanoff is the only one who seems to have stood her ground against him. Mussolini could not tolerate obstacles, yet he was very skillful, at the right moment, in bypassing them, at the cost of compromises incompatible with his maximalist ideology and – perhaps – with his own inclinations. Having been formed as an uncompromising maximalist, but too realistic and pragmatic to live with illusions, when it became clear to him that the Socialists would never achieve anything, or if we prefer, that rigid ideas and programs would lead nowhere, he replaced steadfastness in ideals with clarity of judgment and became pragmatic, very pragmatic.

15 Not only that; Giolitti chaired the parliamentary committee that proposed the 1923 electoral reform; approved by the Chamber of Deputies, it allowed the fascists and their allied parties to legally obtain power through constitutional means. Strangely, Italian historiography considered Giolitti positively, as a progressive liberal politician. In my opinion, these nonsense should not surprise; they are, in my view, part of a subtle work of historical and political mystification. Italian scholars often owe their position to the support of politicians.

He could afford it – his gangs were not interested in ideology at all. The daring ones were men of action, very practical themselves, and they needed a leader – and symbols, which made them so happy because they give the illusion of embodying an ideal, a mission. He was more pragmatic than his opponents – Liberals, Socialists, and Catholics. Both the Bolsheviks and Mussolini came to power, but by following divergent paths. It is true that there is a common origin, but it is impossible to argue beyond a certain point that Fascism was a variant of Socialism; it was rather a compromise between those who claimed to reject compromises and those who thrived on them. It is the typical Hegelian scheme, where the initial position (bourgeois society) confronts its antithesis (the self-proclaimed revolutionary and daring fascism) giving rise to a synthesis (the regime) which in reality is the reaffirmation of the initial situation, in a different form: the heroic petit bourgeois, source of misunderstandings and deceptions. Perhaps the reasons for the future *Duce's* abandonment of maximalist militancy were essentially psychological. Even with all the caution that distance from the figure and his era would impose on making easy judgments, it does not seem impossible to me that - while maintaining the framework outlined above - his truly difficult decision to give up the leadership of the socialist organ was influenced by a conflict, until then latent, between strong individualistic impulses aimed at the triumph of his *ego* and the acceptance of a mission with little hope, sustainable only through a fanatical belief in the idea. Mussolini certainly had a lot of faith, but essentially in himself. It was not supposed to be him serving an idea, but the ideas (and interests) that would serve him. Or perhaps he simply could not tolerate rivals and dissenters. In the complex and varied world of Socialists, where political culture and personal conviction still mattered, the skillful organizer and demagogue encountered strong personalities with whom he had to contend not only through his preferred tools – improvisational oratory, verbal provocation, the image of intransigence, etc. The confrontation with Balabanoff is significant; the rise of the *Duce* presupposes the political elimination of the opponents, and if it is not possible to achieve this in a certain environment because you clash with stronger adversaries, you have to change scenery. If things are like this, the origin of the regime is a synthesis of supply and demand: a Leader is wanted, and someone offers himself. It does not matter if he is a defector. He will be well compensated. From this point of view, the leader's charisma is the fulfillment of a desire – the desire for Authority and leadership.

LITTLE TRICKS

The version offered about the young Mussolini's stay in Switzerland, particularly in Lausanne, is interesting; it is not clear - on this point Sarfatti is extremely reserved, in fact silent - what prompted him to emigrate, later finding himself in very difficult situations. Reference is made to Vilfredo Pareto, from whom Mussolini is said to have drawn the elitist view of political life and society. But the Author - who reports what Mussolini told her - states: "Vilfredo Pareto, among all the professors, had the deepest and most lasting influence on him. From the field of economics, the disciple transferred to the field of politics the 'theory of the imponderables,' which left a deep impression on him"; but above all, he is said to have learned how research should be conducted on an experimental basis, without starting from any theory, or at most accepting some theory as a hypothesis, as a provisional explanation of the facts. "The leader of fascism even today openly boasts that fascism 'does not possess an arsenal of theoretical doctrines, because every system is an error, and every theory a prison.'" But after all, if he had truly adhered in his heart to an anti-ideological, essentially pragmatic perspective, and accepted that one could be guided by experience, how could he call himself a maximalist? In the name of the revolution as such, of course, one could also accept that any

useful means should be employed; but the very statement about fascism's lack of theoretical foundation, traced back to Pareto's teaching, allows us to suppose that his adherence to Socialism was more instrumental than anything else – it would have provided the space in which to carry out his political action. Is it a justification for his abandonment of the socialist ideal, devoutly noted by Sarfatti out of opportunism, or is it the implicit (yet still clear) declaration of the fundamental insincerity of his past adherence to Socialism? Nothing guarantees that what Sarfatti reported corresponds to the truth regarding Pareto's influence on the young 'disciple,' while it is quite evident that – in the early stages of the regime's formation – it was very convenient to make adherence to Socialism appear, so to speak, a tactical choice, not a strategic one: a way to wink at the forces he would have had to fight if he had remained faithful to his original ideal, and to reassure them without having to openly admit to having made a youthful mistake. Admiration, yes, but with cunning.

There are non-negligible omissions, especially when looking at the years of formation: for example, the friendship with the maximalist Serrati, which was far more important and much better documented than the (alleged) influence of Pareto. But of course, Pareto's elites were much more acceptable to the Italian elites than socialist maximalism. And what about Sorel? Well, the author of *Reflections on Violence* could hardly have been unknown to the future *Duce*, for obvious professional reasons. On the other hand, we are informed - by Mussolini himself - that he was greatly influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, obviously the vehicle of the 'Will to Power' - and on this point we can believe both of them, taking as obvious proof the entire political career of the *Duce*. But reflecting on violence does not 'look good,' violence is always used and condemned, so let's leave Sorel (probably the true teacher of such a pupil) aside and take Nietzsche: power is always good, as long as it is ours.

A JUDGMENT AND A DOUBT

Overall, even taking into account the omissions and the frankly exaggerated glorification of the Head of Government in the final chapters, the *Dux* as described by Sarfatti, with all his limitations, is an authentic, though only partially accurate, depiction of a complex personality, not very cultured and not inclined to theorizing, but full of energy and determination, capable of projecting an idea of himself that, combined with a well-assembled set of myths, symbols, and aspirations, proved effective in preserving the regime. I will try to convey the concept of *authenticity*. The course of history involves facts and the meaning of facts. The narration of a single event can be true or false, or even partially true and partially false. On the other hand, the meaning attributed to an event is not in itself true or false, although it can be true in certain aspects, false in others. And then, one thing is the judgment expressed at the moment it occurs, or conversely in the context of a development whose sense can only be grasped at the end of the process – in any case, not immediately. Or many years later. The perspective changes over time, information is gained or lost, etc. But in general, it is impossible to assign a truth value to a judgment about the sense, the meaning of an event or a series of events. This is especially true if one judges a politician, or rather his political action. Within the limits outlined above, the 'figure' depicted by Sarfatti corresponds to the image Mussolini projected of himself. It is useless to ask whether this was true or false.

A figure is not a statement about a presumed state of affairs, and an ideology, no matter how ragged like the fascist one, does not describe the world; at most it interprets it or changes it. But not

all representations – even in the impossibility of defining their truth value – are on the same level. Some are blurred, superficial, distorted by the narrator, etc. Furthermore, the perception we have of a personality is subjective. We must ask ourselves what distinguishes a ‘good’ description from a ‘bad’ one. Unfortunately, it is not true that a good description must correspond to a presumed concrete original. In the case of the public man, the original that one tries to represent is not the public man himself, but the impression he gives, that is – in the case of the Leader – the special relationship that binds the leader to the follower. This is what needs to be described correctly. And this relationship cannot be described by someone who is neither a follower nor a leader, simply because it is foreign to them. Someone who is foreign to this relationship cannot experience it, cannot describe it because he does not know it. In this sense – and only in this sense – Sarfatti’s book is authentic: not because everything it says is true, but because it manages to clearly bring out the birth, development, and affirmation of the Leader. This emergence is not just the narration of a sequence of events, it is not a chronicle. It is a good description of the Leader. The *ideal* leader has the qualities attributed to him, and from this perspective even the hyperboles make sense and are justified; but if we remove them, what remains? The Chief is exceptional by nature; one is born a ‘Chief.’ If we reduce him to a representation without hyperboles, he remains a skilled, shrewd, capable person, but then where lies his right to be the Chief? In being the one who hits the hardest? And what about the charismatic power he radiates? (In reality, which his followers attribute to him, but to them it really seems to emanate from the Chief). This irrational power is fundamental in the foundation of Fascism. There is no Fascism without the Leader.

Yet, a doubt remains. How much of the figure of the *Duce* came from the man himself? In other words: was he expressing his own nature, or performing? Was he a highly skilled professional, an actor fully aware of the role he was playing? Many things suggest this; his political career could have been just opportunism aimed at seizing the opportunity. On closer inspection, this explanation seems sufficient. There were too many compromises to assert that the man had embodied an ideal. Yet there was an ideal; one could ironically speculate that the ideal had taken hold,¹⁶ but it was someone else’s ideal, not his own, nor that of most; when it came down to it, the true nature of the regime was revealed.¹⁷ The *Duce* became such because there was a need for him, and the ideal gave a ‘noble’ meaning to the entire endeavor; in this sense, there is an aristocratic element in the rise of Fascism. Some took the ideal seriously, and at the same time were fascinated by the man, superimposing the two elements, and from it arose the image presented to us by *Dux*. Is all this authentic? Yes, if a painting by an artist is.

16 In the sense in which Hegel’s *Cunning of Reason* would operate. “Fascism is a religious conception, in which man is seen in his immanent relationship with a higher law, with an objective Will that transcends the particular individual and elevates him to a conscious member of a spiritual society. Those who in the religious politics of the fascist regime stopped at mere considerations of expediency, did not understand that fascism, besides being a system of government, is also, and above all, a system of thought” – Giovanni Gentile, in *The Doctrine of Fascism*. One of the ‘someone’.

17 Anyone who wanted to write a *Turncoat’s Manual* should base it on the biographies of many Fascist leaders, first and foremost the Chief.